

Seeing the Tornado destruction on the front page of the Dispatch last week really grabbed me and I felt guilty heading out to track practice. Plus there have been so many other things running through my mind and life pulling at me to question why some silly sport has any relevance to anything. All the news is bad, every story is a downer. So I saved the one Track article about The Regionals for last.

“Regionals Loaded With Central Ohio Talent”

In fact, I read it twice.

No mention was made of the Columbus Academy boys Track team, the District winners were not mentioned. 31 teams jammed into one venue and we come from behind and light it up, taking first and fourth in the 300 hurdles, both guys running PRs, then going 1-2 in the 800, 3rd and 5th in the 3200, and then we put a stamp on it by winning the 4x400...there aren't some guys worth mentioning as we head into Regionals? Oh, here's another article about the Casino...the dispute, the rancor, the lawsuits...

But, we can only do what is put before us and I saw the kids going out to the track and just knew. A little bit of goodness, no matter how small, helps. So, let's apply ourselves here at these Regionals. Let's try to make our own good, happy, triumphant, achievement story and make the people nearby feel better. Like me. And your parents, and your friends and your teachers and hey, let's get after it. That was my thinking anyway.

I brought the article to practice. Cut it out. I pretended like I was going to read it to them and they were waiting and then I turned it over. NOT MENTIONED was scrawled across it by me. Guys, you haven't gotten anybody's attention I guess. I guess if you're not running for a Division I school, you're no good, you're not worthy. Okay, let's get a shower. Let's wrap it up, let's...

Or wait a minute...correct me if I'm wrong...Jon Michael, have you been loafing again and doing your usual take a couple of months off or, correct me if I'm wrong, not taken fewer than three days off since the State Meet last year? Aren't you guys undefeated in the 4x800 for the season? Ty, didn't you dive for the finish to qualify for this meet? Dominic, didn't you run the hardest race of your life on the hottest day of the year Saturday to get here? Jack, aren't you the District Champ in the 300 hurdles...Johnny, Ben, Jake, didn't all you guys run four events in practically every single meet all season to get here?

So.

The boys went out and ran the 4x800 relay and won it Wednesday. John Sutton ran 2:02, Jake 2:08, Dominic 2:00 and Jon Michael 2:00, for an 8:10, winning by 80 yards uncontested, so that was something. Jack had jumped 19'3" but had been disappointed by the sixth place. We weren't leading the points, we had no high hurdlers, no Pole vault, no shot, no discus, no high jump, no 100, 200, 400, no 4x100, no 4x200...yikes, what was I thinking?!

Well, but we did have two guys in the 300 hurdles, the 800, the 1600, Dominic in 3200, and our 4x400...the hardest races in the sport and seven guys. And 13 stinkin' little points. Not making many waves, no much ripple effect...ah, well...what's to write home about...?

Practically before we can even get situated, set up camp, and read the heat sheets, Bishop Ready has won the High Hurdles, gotten 1st and 4th in the 100, and won the 4x200. Boom, boom, boom...35 points. We haven't even participated yet.

Most of the conversation around the 1600 was how hard it was going to be because of the times coming in and how hard it was going to be to come back and run the next races, the next two races in Jon Michael's case. My sage advice-just run the footrace.

They did. It was hard. Dominic ran a time equal to the fourth fastest 1600 in CA history (4:25.8) and got 5th??!! and didn't qualify. But that was still 4 points...better than nothing. Jon Michael also ran a PR by nearly 5 seconds going from 4:27.8 to 4:22.8! and got 3rd...but he qualified for States and nailed down 6 points. 23 points now. By the time I got over to the bullpen to talk to them, they looked like death warmed over.

“Come with me, don't change your shoes, leave your warm-ups here, you are warming down for real, not for pretend. I'm taking you. NOW.”

I did have a hold of Dominic by the shirt dragging him across the gravel in his spikes, Jon Michael in his socks, heading toward a big green field, away from the track...warming them down like racehorses.

"I can't lift my arms," says Dominic.

"Drop them down to your sides, dude, let them dangle..." He does.

Jon Michael was quiet, we were jogging, it was hot, I started my other timer to see how much time it would really be between the 1600 and 800 that Jon Michael had to come back and run, and run hard enough and well enough to defend his Regional title of last year. Dominic had to come back and run the 3200...nice hot day, lots of sun still in the sky.

"Keep jogging until you feel like telling some jokes, then you'll be okay, don't stop." One of the most resisted but oldest lessons in track, get the lactic acid out of your system and then you can race again.

I hand things over to good old Brian Burke, former CA runner, doing the best job this season as an assistant, he saw us go out and being Mr. Johnny-on-the-spot, headed out to help, staying with them until they felt like humans again. When I came through the opening in the stands to the finish line, the 4x100 relay was right at the tape...Ready, winners...45 points. A perfect meet for them. Four for four with 5 trinket points. We ain't dead yet, but...

Next up, Jack and Tyler in the 300 hurdles. I had a little conversation with them about how perfectly this was set up since Tyler was in lane 3 and Jack in lane 4, with the other two best guys outside of Jack and visible to both of them in lanes 5 and 6. Better for Tyler to see how fast to go out of the blocks, and of course, "you don't want him to catch you Jack, he's coming on strong at this point, so he *might catch you from behind...*" Jack was having none of it. He was stone-faced. Not happening.

The gun goes off and Jack is flying out of the blocks. Tyler, his usual sluggish self, getting to the first hurdle on the wrong lead leg...'ah, kid, come on...' Problem is, some other kid, in lane 5 is out even faster than Jack. I watch them. It's close, but Jack is decidedly a good two yards behind. Tyler is in about 7th place. Up they come onto the home stretch, three hurdles to go. Jack is moving. The kid is tying up slightly. Two hurdles, and Jack has him in his sights, but does he have enough time...Tyler is still back but he's coming...one hurdle to go and Jack is about a foot behind the guy, but moving fast, and smoothly. In a flash, the kid in third place falls hard, the crowd, stunned, "*ooooowww!!*" Jack, undistracted, lowers, leans and sprints ahead, winning by two yards. Click, got his time. I look over and there is Ty, smoking up toward the line, in *fourth-YES!!! STATES BABY!* Click, got his time.

The race over, I look at the watch. 39.8...Tyler's time is on the screen since the second time shows, and it's a full second faster than I have ever seen him run. Under 40. Baby, that's serious, a PR by a full second...I go to memory, click, 38.6, Jack's time. Whoa...that's not going to be 40.1 or somewhere when they give the official result. 38.99. That's school record territory, Ryan Wilson/Glenn Wilson territory. It's also 15 points. Hmmm...38 points. And, we got some more guys coming.

I go across the track to the bullpen to check in with my 800 guys. 28 minutes of recovery and counting...wonder how they are. The race is now. Girls first, we have about 3 more minutes. Johnny Sutton, good thing he's fresh, that'll help a lot, and Jon Michael...29 minutes and 46, 47, come on officials take your time, check for jewelry, go over the cut-in rules, count-em up, make sure their numbers are right...no hurry here.

"I know what to do, coach, but what do you think I should do?" says Jon Michael.

"Run the footrace."

"Okay."

They go over and I look at the time, 33 minutes...okay, here we go. The race starts, 10 of the 16 guys are bunched up and some look like they're sprinting...'Calm down guys, 700 meters to go.' I'm on the far side now, directly across from the finish line. A good place for perspective. They all come around for the first lap, bunched in a big group, Jon Michael gliding up through the runners, Johnny on his heels. 55 or so for the first lap. Gebby territory, but they look relaxed, fluid, in control. They get over by me at the start of the backstretch, now they are separated from the field. They continue, uncontested, 1st for Jon Michael, 2nd for Johnny. One-two, just like last week. I check my watch. 1:57.86...'wait, what? Smokin', come on, that's Johnny's time?!?!? Huge PR! Jon Michael, 1:57.43...guys, way to put it together. I yell over to them across the field. "*WAY TO RACE!!!*" In the few minutes it takes to get over to me, I realize what a great meet they are putting together. 18 more points-as many as you can get in a single event. Can't do any better than that. And this is Regionals, not the Bloom Carroll Invitational.

John is hugely enervated. Pale, zoned-out, bad headache. Lactic acid overdose. Trust me John, go with Jon Michael, he's going to warm you down now. He just learned how. They stagger off. Johnny more than Jon Michael. They have to get ready for the 4x400. We're the defending Regional champs as well as co-Region 11 record holders. Can't bow out of this one. Plus, there may be some team I don't know about hiding in the bushes with a bag of points I didn't scout. Warm down.

"I wanna make it to states on my own." Dominic is saying this to me now. He's on the 4x800 relay, he didn't make it in the 1600, so he's back and ready to go again.

"How do you feel about that 4:25.8?"

"Is that what I ran?"

"That's what you ran. 4th best in School history, until tonight. What do you want to try to do here. It's hot, it's going to be hard and it's going to hurt, in case you didn't have a feel for that...ahem...So, don't lose contact with the field. That's going to be the difficult thing. They'll all go out too fast, don't panic, they'll come back to you but you'll have to chase it down. And P.S. nobody out there who's a two miler runs a 52 in the 400, that's why they're two milers. Don't forget that. See what you can do. It won't be pleasant."

It wasn't pleasant. At the halfway point, the field had come through in 4:45, or 9:30 pace. Dominic had run 10:27 at Districts and had a PR of 10:06 on a cool day. We all knew what the kids had posted at their various Districts. These were the kinds of guys who run all over their towns all year. The kinds of guys who run road races in the summer, dream about running Marathons. Not soccer players or strength guys. These kids don't want muscles in their arms. If a brawl broke out, I'd go with Dominic. Still, the clock was ticking and the field was breaking up a bit. Three guys were out in front, the guys we expected and three guys were in a bunch running for the coveted fourth place, the State Meet qualifier spot and Dominic was about 4 yards behind them. I felt for him. But I have a lot of faith in him too.

Every lap he'd run by me and I'd give a bit of info to him, a pep up. "Don't lose contact." Problem was there were three runners and he would have to catch up to the group and then beat all three of them if he was going to make it. He kept inching up. A lap and a straightaway to the finish. Brutal was the only word for it.

"Fiftyoninenetynine," I yelled to him at that point. Meaning, these guys can't run with you, they can't run your 51.99 split you ran Wednesday in the 4x400 semis. However he does it, he seemed to call it up and do it. He passed all three of them, held on and grabbed fourth place all by himself. States. PR. 10:00.9. After 4:25.8 on a hot evening. A very challenging situation. He's a gamer.

The 4x4. The Mile Relay. The final event. I have said to them, "If you're trying to win the meet, you want to put a stamp on it at the end. Or be ready to. That's the trademark around here guys, if you've ever talked to anyone who wore these uniforms before you did.

So Ben Meacham leads off, the man who rescued the team last year in this very race, running in place of Gebby to take no injury chances then, and he knows the territory. Bang, the start, off smoothly, a little faster than usual. Lots of speed here. Kids in all the lanes are sprinting. Everyone wants to make it to States. He hands to Johnny, 52.54, his best split of the year. John, better than he ever realized at this sport, looks a bit tired on the backstretch, for good reason. He's in about 7th of 8 as he comes onto the top of the straightaway on the front however, the homestretch, he changes gears and changes his mojo. He powers by the entire field of runners in front of him. He runs his lifetime best, 51.31, and hands off in first. From there, I simply watch the next two guys simply pull away, 50.32, a PR, for Jack, and 50.83 for a tireless Jon Michael. That's putting a stamp on it. They won going away. Now we had 71 hard fought points (Bishop Ready had to sit and watch the whole thing, since they were done after the 4x100 relay, and totaled 45 points for Runner's up) and, only the 5th Regional Championship trophy we've ever taken home. Talk about doing it the hard way. And, they're all going to The State Track Meet. Every single one of them. For the first time ever.

Maybe they'll get mentioned.